

Albert Vorspan, 95, Is Dead; Rallied Reform Judaism for Social Justice

Albert Vorspan in 2009. In joining a contingent of rabbis to protest segregation in St. Augustine, Fla., in 1964, he helped write a letter from jail that read, “We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly watching the smoke rise from Hitler’s crematoria.” Union for Reform Judaism

By **Joseph Berger**

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Albert Vorspan, who steered the Reform movement and other Jewish organizations toward immersing themselves in social causes, particularly the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans and opposition to the war in Vietnam, died on Sunday in New Paltz, N.Y. He was 95.

The cause was complications of cancer, his son Charles said.

Mr. Vorspan, as a senior vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, led the social justice efforts of a movement with 1.3 million members and another 700,000 adherents.

With riveting speeches and well-composed essays, he traveled the country urging Reform congregations to partner with local organizations on social action, focusing on civil rights, women’s rights, opposition to apartheid and poverty relief.

In June 1964, Mr. Vorspan, though not a rabbi himself, traveled to St. Augustine, Fla., with 16 Reform rabbis at the invitation of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to protest segregation and Ku Klux Klan influence in that city, the nation’s oldest.

They were arrested for holding an integrated prayer service in front of a segregated restaurant and joining young black people at the lunch counter of another. The men spent the night in jail and issued a widely publicized letter exhorting the Jewish community to take part in the struggle and not fall prey to silence, which they called “the unpardonable sin of our time.”

“We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly watching the smoke rise from Hitler’s crematoria,” the letter, written mostly by Mr. Vorspan and Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, said. “We came because we know that second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man’s capacity to act.”

As a leading denominational figure, Mr. Vorspan was more attracted to political action than spirituality, his son Charles said. Rabbi David Saperstein, a senior adviser to the Union for Reform Judaism, as the congregational arm is now called, said Mr. Vorspan had been motivated by the Bible’s ethical traditions, which, for example, urge people to care more about the hardships of the widow

and the orphan than about the impeccable performance of rituals.

Mr. Vorspan, he said, wrestled with the question “How do you express Judaism through commitment to social justice?” And just as other leading social-justice figures of his time, like Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel, responded to that question in their own ways, Mr. Vorspan shaped his answer “through the institutions of Reform Judaism,” Rabbi Saperstein said.

Mr. Vorspan could trace his work with Jewish organizations to the experiences of his youth. As a teenager he was dismayed by the routine anti-Semitism he saw in Minneapolis and heard on the radio, in the fascist-supporting broadcasts of the Rev. Charles Coughlin. He had been equally distressed by what he saw as American passivity in the face of the beatings of Jews and the burning of synagogues in Nazi Germany before the war.

For many years Mr. Vorspan took part in dialogues with black leaders about rising tensions between blacks and Jews. In 1969, during a battle over school decentralization in a Brooklyn district, he called on his black counterparts to condemn anti-Semitic statements by some black teachers. At the same time, he took some Jewish spokesmen to task for stirring the Jewish community “to the very brink of hysteria.”

A Navy combat veteran of World War II, Mr. Vorspan publicly assailed the war in Vietnam as early as 1965, when most Americans still supported it. He helped persuade the Reform movement to become one of the first Jewish organizations to pass a resolution opposing the war — an action that prompted some congregations to bolt the movement.

Mr. Vorspan wrote several books on social justice, including “Justice and Judaism: Searching the Prophets for Values” (1981, written with Rabbi Balfour Brickner). The works have become mainstays of Reform schools and adult education programs.

A bespectacled onetime pipe smoker with a jovial laugh, Mr. Vorspan was famous in the Reform movement for his jokes as well. In addition to his tracts on social justice, he published four humor collections. One is titled, “My Rabbi Doesn’t Make House Calls: A Guide to Games Jews Play (1969).

In addition to his tracts on social justice, Mr. Vorspan published collections of his humor, like this one.

But he also had his share of critics. In 1988, he drew attacks from a number of Jewish leaders for [an article he wrote](#) for The New York Times Magazine that in part faulted Israel for not offering greater autonomy to Palestinians.

The article appeared at the outbreak of the first intifada, or uprising, to which Israeli soldiers responded with tear gas and bullets.

“Whether we accept it or not,” he wrote, “every night’s television news confirms it: Israelis now seem the oppressors, Palestinians the victims.”

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, accused Mr. Vorspan of engaging in “too much public posturing and too little private discourse.”

Mr. Vorspan responded to the backlash with characteristic humor: “Behold the turtle. It only makes progress when it sticks out its neck.”

Albert Vorspan was born in St. Paul on Feb. 12, 1924, to Ben and Fanny Vorspan, observant immigrants from Warsaw who had fled the pogroms of the 1880s and landed in Galveston, Tex., before making their way to Minnesota. His father was a peddler, his mother a homemaker. Al, as he was always known, was one of four sons. (A sister, Rose, died in infancy.)

Mr. Vorspan was educated in public schools. Appalled by the rise of Hitler, he joined the Young Judean Trailblazers, which sought the creation of a Jewish state. He also became an enthusiast of Hubert H. Humphrey, then a populist Minnesota Democrat who championed farmers and workers.

Mr. Vorspan started college at the University of Minnesota but left to enlist in the Navy. He saw action as a gunnery officer on the destroyer Wesson in the South Pacific. The ship was north of the island of Okinawa when a Japanese kamikaze fighter plane dived into the vessel, killing six sailors instantly in the explosion and wounding others, two of whom later died. Mr. Vorspan was greatly affected by his tending to the wounded on a flaming ship, his son Charles said.

Upon discharge, Mr. Vorspan finished college at New York University. After a brief stint as a newspaper reporter, he took a job at the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (now the Jewish Council on Public Affairs), where he was spotted by Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and recruited. When Rabbi Eisendrath [died suddenly](#) in 1973, his successor, [Alexander M. Schindler](#), asked Mr. Vorspan to be his senior vice president.

In that post he helped organize the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, the hub of the movement’s social-justice activities. He also decided to run for Congress from his own Long Island district, in western Nassau County, in 1968, fueled by his opposition to the war.

Though endorsed by the Democratic organization, he was [soundly defeated](#) in the primary by a far more celebrated war opponent, [Allard Lowenstein](#). Unlike Mr. Lowenstein, Mr. Vorspan refused to attack Humphrey, the Democratic presidential candidate and his fellow native Minnesotan, beyond questioning his support for the war as Lyndon B. Johnson’s vice president.

Mr. Vorspan had retired to New Paltz. At his death, Charles Vorspan said, Mr. Vorspan was writing a memoir; its most recent title was “Dying at 95 Is the Least of My Problems.”

His wife of 72 years, Shirley (Nitchun) Vorspan, an artist and potter, [died last year](#) at 93. In addition to his son Charles, he is survived by two daughters, Roberta Lynch and Deborah Gorin; another son, Kenneth; a brother, Chet; eight grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Friends said he had recently been deflated by [continuing episodes of anti-Semitism](#) in the United States, in particular the anti-Semitic marches by white supremacists in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017.

But he remained optimistic, writing that he believed that young people would be

“jolted awake,” that “America once again will be the light to the world” and that he would ultimately be able to say, “My life’s work was not wasted.”

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